

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 2543

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, ASEC, CASC, CO
SUBJECT: KIDNAPPING OF PCV STARR

REF: STATE 058401

REFTEL ASKED FOR INFORMATION CONCERNING GOC MILITARY
INTENTIONS CONCERNING STARR CASE. FOLLOWING IS TEXT
OF LATEST ASSESSMENT PREPARED BY U.S. MILGP, WHOSE
EXECUTIVE OFFICER HAS BEEN MAINTAINING LIAISON WITH
COLOMBIAN MILITARY ON THIS CASE. ASSESSMENT HAS
CONCURRENCE OF EMBASSY AND DEFENSE ATTACHE.
BEGIN TEXT

(A) PROBLEM-CHANCES OF COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES
MOUNTING "RESCUE" OPERATION OF PCV STARR, OR UNDER-
TAKING OTHER MILITARY OPERATIONS AGAINST HIS CAPTORS.

(B) ASSESSMENT- VERY UNLIKELY AT THIS TIME.

(C) REASONS-

1. COLOMBIAN MILITARY DO NOT KNOW WHERE STARR
IS BEING HELD.
 2. COLOMBIAN MILITARY KNOW ONLY THE VERY GENERAL
AREA WHERE FARC CAMPS MAY BE LOCATED AT ONE TIME OR
ANOTHER, BUT NO SPECIFIC CURRENT LOCATIONS.
 3. TERRAIN IS VERY DIFFICULT IN AREA. VIRTUALLY
NO ROADS OR TRAILS PERMITTING MOTORIZED ACCESS OF
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- TROOPS. FOOT AND ANIMAL TRAILS DO NOT PERMIT EVEN
REASONABLY RAPID CONCENTRATION OF TROOPS, AND ANY
SIGNIFICANT TROOP MOVEMENT ON GROUND WOULD GIVE FARC
AMPLE TIME TO DISAPPEAR WITHOUT CONTACT. COLOMBIAN
MILITARY KNOWS THIS, AND NOT INCLINED WASTE EFFORT.
4. AERIAL RECONNAISSANCE VIRTUALLY WORTHLESS
BECAUSE OF FOLIAGE. ALSO VERY HAZARDOUS FOR LOW-

FLYING AIRCRAFT BECAUSE UNSEEN FARC CAN BRING DOWN AIRCRAFT WITH MACHINE GUN FIRE WITHOUT SIGNIFICANTLY EXPOSING THEMSELVES. COLOMBIAN MILITARY KNOWS THIS, AND NOT INCLINED RISK AIRCRAFT.

5. GROUND CONTACT BY TROOPS WITH GUERRILLAS IN THIS TYPE OF TERRAIN CUSTOMARILY ONLY RESULTS IN CASUALTIES TO LEADING TROOPS AT HANDS OF UNSEEN ENEMY. COLOMBIAN MILITARY KNOWS THIS, AND NOT INCLINED LOSE TROOPS IN FUTILE PURSUIT.

6. IF THEY KNOW WHERE FARC (OR STARR) WAS, WHICH THEY DON'T, AND HAVE NO EXPECTATION OF LEARNING EXCEPT BY A GRATUITOUS ACCIDENT, IT MIGHT BE THEORETICALLY FEASIBLE FOR THEM TO ATTEMPT TO MOUNT AN OPERATON, IF THEY HAD ENOUGH HELICOPTERS TO BRING IN ENOUGH TROOPS TO ENOUGH PLACES IN A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME. HOWEVER, THEY SIMPLY DO NOT HAVE NEARLY ENOUGH HELICOPTERS TO MOVE ENOUGH TROOPS TO ESTABLISH NUMERICAL SUPERIORITY NEEDED FOR A RATIONAL ATTEMPT IN SUSPECTED FARC BASE AREAS.

7. FINALLY, DEPUTY J-2 SAYS THEY HAVE O PRESENT PLANS TO TRY ANYTHING AT ALL. THEY APPARENTLY FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT THE NEXT THING ANYONE WILL HEAR CONCERNING STARR WILL BE A DEMAND ON THE U.S. FOR RANSON; THEN THEY'LL BE MORE INTERESTED.

(D) CIRCUMSTANCES FOR CHANGE OF ASSESSMENT:

1. COLOMBIAN MILITARY RECEIPT OF RELIABLE INF4-
MATION ON WHEREABOUTS OF FARC AND/OR STARR. EVEN THEN,
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HOWEVER, FOR THE REASONS OUTLINED ABOVE, THERE IS LITTLE THEY COULD DO UNLESS THE INFORMATION INDICATED THAT THE LOCATION WAS IN OR VERY NEAR AN URBAN AREA; WHERE SIGNIFICANT GOVERNMENT SECURITY FORCES ARE AVAILABLE.

2. COLOMBIANS ARE SLATED TO RECEIVE SEVEN NEW BELL HELICOPTERS, WITH LIMITED TROOP-CARRYING CAPACITY, BY EARLY APRIL. HOWEVER, THESE IN COMBINATION WITH THE HELICOPTERS THEY NOW HAVE FLYING WOULD NOT, IN OUR OPINION, GIVEN THEM ENOUGH AIRLIFT CAPACITY TO MOUNT A SWIFT ENOUGH AND LARGE ENOUGH OPERATON, EXCEPT PERHAPS VERY CLOSE TO AN URBAN AREA IF THEIR INFORMATION INDICATED THAT STARR THEN BEING HELD BY A GREATLY REDUCED FARC FORCE.

3. COLOMBIANS ALSO EXPECT TO RECEIVE, SOMETIME IN NEXT COUPLE OF MONTHS, A SHIPMENT OF BELL PARTS WHICH SHOULD ENABLE THEM TO PUT SOME OF THEIR GROUNDED HELICOPTERS BACK IN THE AIR. HOWEVER, THERE WILL BE A CONSIDERABLE TIME LAG BETWEEN RECEIPT OF THE PARTS

AND RESTORATION OF GROUNDED HELICOPTERS TO OPERATIONAL
CONDITION. AND EVEN WHEN ALL THEIR UTILITY HELICOPTERS
ARE OPERATIONAL, THEIR TOTAL CAPACITY WILL STILL
PROBABLY NOT BE SUFFICIENT TO GIVE THEM THE NUMERICAL
SUPERIORITY AT ENOUGH POINTS ON THE GROUND THAT THEY
WOULD PROBABLY FEEL THEY WOULD NEED TO CONDUCT AN OPERA-
TION AWAY FROM URBAN AREAS WITH REASONABLE CHANCES OF
SUCCESS. WHEN THEIR FULL COMPLEMENT OF HELICOPTERS IS
OPERATIONAL, HOWEVER, THEY MIGHT TRY AN OPERATION CLOSE
TO AN URBAN AREA. (EVEN THE, HOWEVER, THE PROCESS OF
CONCENTRATING THEIR SCATTERED HELICOPTERS IN NEIVA,
FOR EXAMPLE, WOULD GIVE WARNING TO ANY REASONABLY
INTELLIGENT URBAN FARC SYMPATIZER, WHO IN TURN MIGHT
WELL HAVE AMPLE TIME TO PASS THE WARNING TO FARC BEFORE
THE PROCESS OF GATHERING HELICOPTERS AND TROOPS FOR AN
OPERATION COULD BE COMPLETED.)

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(E) SUMMARY: CHANCES OF RESCUE ATTEMPT OR OTHER
MILITARY OPERATION ARE SLIGHT, AT LEAST UNTIL RECEIPT
OF RELIABLE INFORMATION INDICATING STARR BEING HELD IN
OR NEAR URBAN AREA BY REDUCED FARC ELEMENT. THERE-
AFTER CHANCES CONSIDERABLY BETTER, THOUGH (THEORETICALLY)
PROBABLY NOT AS GOOD AS FOR AN ATTEMPT BASED ON SOLID INFORMAT-
ION CONCERNING A PENDING PRISONER-RANSOM EXCHANGE.
END TEXT
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